

the *Circular*

Summer 2005: Issue One

**NEW INGREDIENTS
SAME GREAT
TASTE !**

Contains: *

**a/state!
Mob Justice!
Everlasting Empire!
News!
Columns!
Features and more!**

**May contain traces of nuts.*



Launch issue of the free gaming magazine from Contested Ground Studios.

Warning: May be enjoyable. Produced in FK

Nº1

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Legal Stuff

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Submissions

Should be sent to:
circular@contestedground.co.uk

Note that, unless agreed otherwise before publication, we publish articles on our standard copyright terms and we do not pay for articles.

Letters to the Editor should be fewer than 200 words. They will be edited for length, clarity and accuracy. Writers must mention germane interest. All letters must contain the writer's name and contact address, which can be withheld upon request. We cannot acknowledge or return letters. Letters become the property of Contested Ground Studios and may be published in all media. Anonymous letters will not be deemed suitable for publication.

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Gregor Hutton is the Editor of 'The Circular' and wrote Ghostfighter for a|state.

Gregor's favourite drink is Jack Daniels and Coke, with ice and a slice of orange, lemon or lime. Surprise him.

A Round Table

King Arthur and his knights sat at a round table. The thinking was that no knight, even Arthur, would have precedence and all would be equal. It is this spirit that I'd like to foster in 'The Circular'.

The predecessor to this magazine was the a|state-focused Mire End Tribune. The MET was a very good product and if you're interested in a|state you most certainly should collect the six issues available online. It offered great support for the a|state game line, but it honestly could not represent CGS and our other games on an equal footing.

Contested Ground Studios is about more than just a|state, and with 'The Circular' we hope to provide an engaging and entertaining games magazine, while supporting all our products. Yes, for the first few issues there will be more a|state stuff than anything else, but this is only natural. We had a lot of submissions for the old MET and

while we could not put them all in they still represent a significant word count.

But the strength of 'The Circular', for me, will be the regular columns. They will be mostly independent of our game lines and will make every issue have real value for our readers. Even if you don't play any of our games I feel that these will be good enough to make 'The Circular' worth the download. I firmly believe that all the writers deserve their equal seat at the table.

And from next issue: a Letters Page, with the best letters we get via regular mail. For instant gratification we have forums online, but I hope the Letters Page will be a different kind of forum.

Anyway, enough of me, enjoy the first of many issues of 'The Circular'.

See you around.

Gregor

Contested Ground Studios
(from left to right):

Gregor Hutton
Paul Bourne
John Wilson
Cathriona Tobin
Iain McAllister
Malcolm Craig



The Editor gives the low down on the CGS Team.

Bourne, Paul. Cigarette-smoking artist and general all-round good guy. Paul is the man behind the distinctive look of the CGS products. An accomplished artist and bass player, he is actually a non-gamer.

Craig, Malcolm. The creator of the a|state RPG and darling of the convention scene. Malcolm is known for driving fast cars, and listening to loud punk rock. But he's not a happy camper when he doesn't get any sleep. A games writer.

Davie, Morgan. A rangy, greying New Zealander who contributes on game development. We're pencilling Morgan in for writing duties when he's back home in Wellington, and far away from us. A gaming geek.

Hutton, Gregor. Editor of The Circular and hack writer and artist. Shuffles emails for a publishing company by day and has a fridge full of booze and condiments. An old-school gamer.

McAllister, Iain. Creator of Mob Justice and writer on our other game lines. The youngster of the group, Iain is notable for being the tall, thin one. A friendly face with the patience of a saint. Bless. An enthusiastic gamer.

Nisbet, Brian. Writer for a|state. Brian has been a colossus in Irish Gaming for some time and is one of the more distinctive presences on the UK convention scene. A very friendly fellow for sure. A hard-core gamer.

Saunders, Greg. Writer for a|state and ideas man. In real life Greg is a shadowy chemical genius, which means for him fantasy is more mundane than reality. A smart gamer.

Tobin, Cathriona. Our accountant and tempting piece of Irish booth bait. Rarely seen without either a fag in her mouth, ahem, or a cup of coffee. Has buried CGS's crock of gold at the end of a rainbow. A gamer's gamer.

Wilson, John. The Business Manager and financial muscle behind CGS. John is renowned for his dithering and his affable manner. Cannot go from A to B without first visting all the other letters of the alphabet. A mostly harmless gamer.



'Transmissions from the Bunker' is the regular news page for 'The Circular'.

In each issue you'll find the latest news from our bunker here in Falkirk.

This first issue: distribution, PDFs, awards and some conventions.

Indie Press Revolution (IPR)

IPR sell only the best from the independent and small press games scene, so we're delighted that they will now be carrying our products. Set up by Brennan Taylor and Ed Cha in order to bring quality independent games to the gaming public, IPR sells direct to the consumer and to the retailer. Given the strength of the pound against the dollar (and the costs of shipping from the UK to overseas), it's been relatively expensive for our non-European customers to order direct from CGS, so we're delighted. Now, customers who aren't on our side of the Atlantic can take advantage of IPR's free shipping and excellent catalogue of indie games. <http://www.indiepressrevolution.com/>

Key 20 Direct

Like IPR, Key 20 Direct specialise in selling games produced by small press and indie companies, offering a huge range of excellent titles. We're very happy to say that Key 20 will now be stocking the CGS range, selling direct to the public and to distributors. So, if you are a distributor who previously ordered from our former fulfillment partners and are looking to restock your inventory with our products, then Key 20 will be the people to get in touch with. <http://www.key20.com/>

Ghostfighter PDF

The first PDF-only supplement for aIstate was launched on RPGNow in March. Ghostfighter retails for \$6.95 and you get a 40-page print-layout PDF plus a screen-readable version and assorted goodies. The PDF details the eponymous knife-fighters of The City and has received positive reviews. <http://www.rpgnow.com/>

Lostfinders Guide... PDF

June saw the release of the Lostfinders Guide To Mire End in PDF form via RPGNow. For \$6.95 you get the 33-page print-layout PDF plus a screen-readable version and the customary assorted goodies. <http://www.rpgnow.com/>

Faces In The Crowd

August sees the release of the PDF supplement Faces In The Crowd – Volume 1: Villains via RPGNow. This book details ten adversaries from the darker side of The City and features glorious full-page art of each villain, their stats and adventure ideas. For \$4.95 you can read

all about the brutal Johnny Two Hammers, the utterly cold Gruppenkommandant Fegelein, the voluble Temperance Fellskate and seven others. Other volumes in this series will be released in the future. <http://www.rpgnow.com/>

GM Screen

A must for every aIstate GM is the downloadable print-it-yourself GM screen from RPGNow. It contains adventure nuggets, combat tables and handy information and retails for only \$2.95. Of course, it looks spectacular as you'd expect. You can probably guess the URL by now: <http://www.rpgnow.com/>

Cloud City

Vancouver's Cloud City convention took place in May. Canada's finest gamers saw an aIstate signed-and-remarqed prize bundle go to a lucky [unlucky, surely – Ed.] participant in Mike Beck's aIstate game at the con. It's a pretty unique set of books since they're signed by almost the whole team including our accountant.

GenCon Attendance

See most of the Contested Ground team at The Forge booth in Indianapolis, Indiana for GenCon Indy 2005. The mother of all cons runs from 18 to 21 August and is 'the best four days in gaming.' Malc, Gregor, Iain, Cat and Morgan will be there. We'll have some deals going on and are happy to sign any books, even ones from other companies. <http://www.gencon.com/>

ENnie Awards

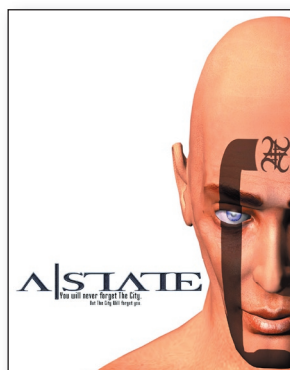
Contested Ground Studios have submitted the Lostfinders Guide To Mire End and Ghostfighter for consideration in the 2005 ENnie Awards. The results are announced and awards presented at GenCon Indy in August. Last year aIstate was one of five finalists in the Best Non-d20 Game and Best Graphic Design And Layout awards. <http://www.enworld.org/>

The Indie RPG Awards

The third annual IndieRPG Awards are up for grabs and the lucky [surely you mean deserved? – Ed.] winners will be announced at GenCon 2005. LGTME and the aIstate MRB are in the mix and we'll see what happens in Indy. <http://www.rpg-awards.com/>



Current releases from Contested Ground Studios



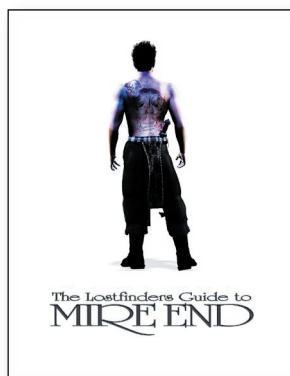
a|STATE

"a|state is an impressive mixture of the familiar, urban drudgery, steampunk thrills, futuristic technology, and horror. The setting of this game is simply rave worthy and the language is phenomenal, with impressively rich language used throughout the fictional elements." **Gamingreport.com**

"I can't wait to play a session or two of this game. This was so unbelievably refreshing to read - it includes a solid, somewhat realistic system, a fantastic and well written setting, and great writing all around. a|state is definitely one of my picks for best RPG title for 2004!" **Silven Crossroads**

"This is a game with a firm grasp of its setting, that successfully brings its grime and grit to the fore through its colour fiction. More Dickensian Science Fiction than steampunk, a|state is a rich setting beneath its grime, with an eerie elegance lurking in its peripheral vision." **Pyramid Magazine**

Format: Hardback Colour cover, B&W internal art **Page Count:** 256pp **RRP:** £25 / \$40US **ISBN:** 0-9545191-0-8 **Release Date:** Available now



The Lostfinders Guide to MIRE END

"I heartily recommend it. If the chaps at Contested Ground Studios keep up this level of good work the future of a|state, unlike the setting, is bright indeed." **Flamesrising.com**

"This title is a must for any player or GM of a|state." **Silven Crossroads**

"The Lostfinders Guide to Mire End does a superb job of expanding a sector noted in the core rulebook although it is a limited, concise expansion. As such, it leaves readers begging for more." **Gamingreport.com**

'The Lostfinders Guide to Mire End' is also available in PDF format from www.rpgnow.com

Format: Colour cover, B&W internal art **Page Count:** 32pp **RRP:** £6 / \$10US **ISBN:** 0-9545191-1-6 **Release Date:** Available now



ghostfighter

'Ghostfighter' is the first in a series of PDF character supplements for a|state. Each supplement will take an in-depth look at the culture, philosophy, ethos and equipment of a particular career in The City.

Within the 40 pages of 'Ghostfighter' you'll find exclusive fighting styles for Ghostfighters, new advantages and disadvantages, stylish weapons and useful gear, background information, contacts, culture and hang-outs, 5 ready-to-use Ghostfighter templates and details of famous Ghostfighters including Jane Card.

All of this comes with the same high production values that you associate with Contested Ground Studios print products.

'Ghostfighter' is available to download from www.rpgnow.com

Format: PDF, Colour cover, B&W internal art **Page Count:** 40pp **RRP:** \$6.95US **ISBN:** N/A **Release Date:** Available now

If you'd like to get a flavour of our products before you buy, then you can check out our many downloadable previews at: www.contestedground.co.uk

Our free downloadable preview of a|state (cunningly named a|stateLite) weighs in at a hefty 72 pages and features loads of detail on the setting and a complete, but slimmed down, version of the game system.

All Contested Ground print products are available from your friendly local games shop and the following online outlets:

For UK/European sales: www.contestedground.co.uk/shop.html

For US/Non-European sales: www.indiepressrevolution.com

If you are a games distribution company located anywhere in the world and would like to enquire about Contested Ground Studios products, then please contact our fulfillment partners, Key 20, at: www.key20.com



Malcolm Craig is the creator of the **a|state RPG** and submissions editor for 'The Circular'.

Malcolm abstains from strong drink due to a tendency to drive cars rather fast.

Scars in the Landscape.

by Malcolm Craig

So, I have a column to write? I wonder whose idea this was? Anyway, this is the first of my regular musings on the inspirations behind some of the stuff that I write. First off: this isn't going to be about games, more about books, writers, artists, films, places and people that I have found particularly interesting and inspiring. Hopefully some of this will be of interest to others. If not, I'll start writing a gossip column or something.

People have a certain fascination with places that can only be described as 'spooky,' 'creepy' or just plain 'weird.' Abandoned factories, asylums, tunnels, bunkers, fortifications, remnants of the industrial past, slowly crumbling into nothingness, all have their own way of pulling you towards them in an attempt to find out more.

Certainly, a lot of my writing has been influenced by such places, with their sense of desolation and loss. Living in Central Scotland, I'm surrounded by the remnants of a bygone industrial age, but it's often places further afield that have made the greatest impact upon me.

When looking around the internet for inspiration, you can come across some strange sites (stop sniggering at the back there, I'm not talking about that kind of thing!). Photography is often a great source of inspiration for any writer; a bold image sparking off thoughts and ideas, leading you off in new directions. Websites such as the marvellous Abandoned Places really can fire the imagination and get the creative juices flowing. Abandoned Places is the work of Belgian pilot Henk van Rensbergen who, in his spare time, goes round taking photographs of dilapidated industrial facilities. An unusual hobby, but one which has paid dividends with a collection of truly wonderful images. Eerie places like the Triage

Lavoir du Roton, the Le Valdor hospital and the now destroyed Buda Marly coking plant are all captured in colour, black & white and sepia tone for the enjoyment of future generations.

One aspect that raises Abandoned Places above the norm is the quality and imagination of van Rensbergen's photography. His use of light and framing serves to produce some wonderful pictures, transforming industrial ruins into things of beauty and wonder. You could spend hours browsing through his site (and I have). So how does this translate into writing? Well, when writing about certain places or things, I have on many occasions had one of van Rensbergen's images in my mind and attempted to translate the visual wonder of the photograph into the written form. This isn't so much an exercise in trying to describe a photo in verbal terms, but to take the overall feeling that the image provokes and in some way attempt to capture this in a descriptive piece.

As van Rensbergen says in his brief introduction 'Today, the pyramids of the industrial revolution just uselessly stand in the way, they're a scar in the landscape. The deafening noises have been replaced by silence, but if you listen carefully they will tell you their story.' So, by studying these pictures and taking influence from them, we can not only learn their story, but weave our own stories around them, or simply create new places which echo the despoiled and abandoned places of our own world.

As a writer, I consider it of vital importance that sites like Abandoned Places exist, not only to provide inspiration for others, but to preserve images of places which will, in time, crumble into nothingness or be destroyed by the crushing pressures of modernity and bureaucracy. Were it not for the work of people like Henk van Rensbergen, far fewer people would have the opportunity to gaze in wonder upon these monuments to the industrial age and perhaps send their minds wandering down new and imaginative paths. And who knows where they may end up? 📷

Photographs and quote from www.abandoned-places.com used by kind permission of Henk van Rensbergen.





A|STATE

The 16th Gun

by Greg Saunders

Region: Lat 3, Ring 4

Status: Secretive paramilitary/religious site

Law: High

Wealth: Low

Overview

Micklerose cleaned the dull metal; raising a shine on the surface and watching a warped image of his face appear. He was kneeling by the barrel, sitting back on his calves. He studied himself critically in the polished surface. He looked gaunt, some would say haggard, but that was what you got working on the Gun. Food here wasn't as regular as he would have liked but at least he ate, which was more than could be said for some of his family. He'd left them all behind, best to forget them. He was a Gunner now; least he would be once he had finished his apprenticeship. His arm complained. He sat up straight, arching his back to try to ease the ache that had set in an hour ago. He had been cleaning this section of the gun for what seemed an eternity. Just like he had yesterday, and the day before that, sharing the duty with the other apprentices taken up by the Artillerymen. They all cleaned the 16th Gun; it was an honour, though Micklerose thought all his peers would agree with him that it was a painful one. He looked beyond the vast barrel of the Gun at the remains of the others scattered about within the compound. There was number 5, the huge barrel split and warped. There was the crater that marked the site of number 13. Number 3, 15 and 9 were almost intact, twisted metal at their bases the only sign that they would fire no more. Only number 16 remained working, the last Gun, the last defence.

He looked along the length of the barrel, the shining golden metal somehow seeming to magnify the dull light of the sky, reflecting it back tenfold, making the gun seem ablaze. Forty-five feet of fiery metal stretched above him, held in at a constant angle of 41° to the ground. Micklerose knew the number; all the apprentices knew the number. It was sacred. He looked at the remains of the

other guns. Of those that still had recognisable barrels (numbers 3, 5, 9, 11 and 15), all were held at the same angle, pointed in the same direction, toward the outlands, toward the target. Not for the first time Micklerose wondered what that target could be. Did it still exist?

Micklerose yawned.

A noise behind him, a dry slapping sound made him turn. There, at the base of the gun, one of the Artillerymen watched him. Micklerose thought it was Keppler, but it was hard to tell, the figure was wearing his gas mask as usual. They must have finished moving the shells. The noise came from the slapping of the man's unsheathed sword against his leg. Slap, slap, slap, the shiny blade glinting evilly. Micklerose turned back to the metal and rubbed with renewed vigour. An honour he told himself, feeling the other's gaze boring into the back of his head, an honour.

No one knows who built the guns or why they did so, but for as long as anyone can remember the guns have been there, and with them the Artillerymen, their Gunners and Apprentices. Lovingly devoted to the last remaining weapon, number 16, the quasi-religious Artillerymen keep watch over the skies, determined never to cease their vigilance as the last line of defence. Defence against what is not a subject of debate in the barracks, simply keeping the Gun in working order is work enough.

Hidden behind blocks of tenements, away from the sight of the populace the Guns are for most no more than a myth, a story. Little do they know that the weapons and their fanatical curators exist. Set within a perimeter wall of now rotting concrete over twenty feet tall, but hidden from most major thoroughfares by the surrounding buildings, the 18 guns stand in a series of roughly concentric rings. All bar the 16th gun are inoperative and show some signs of damage. The six Artillerymen, twelve Gunners and remaining Apprentices who tend the last remaining gun live in the barracks, a set of low concrete buildings set snug against the perimeter wall. Numbering less than twenty-five individuals in all, they lovingly maintain the gun, polishing the metal, oiling the gears and cleaning the breach meticulously.

Greg Saunders is Senior Staff Writer for 'The Circular' and has also written numerous highly regarded items for, amongst other things, the 'Dying Earth' RPG by Pelgrane Press.

Greg prefers to drink real ale that has been filtered through crushed granite. He then adds twigs and squirrels.



The sole aim of the Artillerymen is to keep the gun working, for they believe that one day The City will call on them, like it did in the past, to defend it from attack. The Artillerymen consider it their sacred duty to maintain the gun and their vigilance. The Artillerymen lead the group, with the Gunners actually performing most of the tasks pertaining to the operation of the weapon. The Apprentices watch, clean and learn. The gun is never moved or the angle of inclination adjusted, for the Artillerymen believe it points to the last great enemy.

The paramilitary organisation of the Artillerymen has strong religious overtones, many of the Artillerymen, their Gunners and Apprentices believing that when they destroy the great enemy they will lead The City to salvation. It is this fervour that has protected them and the 16th gun from predation by others in The City – they protect their charge with a maniac passion. They patrol the perimeter regularly but unobtrusively, careful not to elicit too much interest from their neighbours. No one outside of the order is allowed within the perimeter, and the Artillerymen have sufficient stock of weaponry to see that they remain undisturbed. Only new Apprentices enter, selected carefully by those sympathetic to the Artillerymen from the poor of The City.

Much of the Artillerymen's resources are kept underground, beneath the guns, and include many items of considerable worth in The City. Dogs are kept in one hall, fed off scraps garnered from the surrounding precincts, the wall sound-proofed so their barks don't attract unwelcome attention. Engineering equipment which would greatly interest the Fulgarators should they learn of its existence is stored in another vast hall, racked and catalogued for use. Weapons fill another chamber, ancient sparklocks maintained by the Gunners. And shells of all kinds take up the last hall, stored for future use. All manner of shell types can be found in the dank halls, and it was the accidental release of nerve toxin from one of the shells that first prompted the Artillerymen to wear gas masks. Only the Artillerymen and the senior Gunners are allowed beneath the surface and most of the Apprentices have no idea what lies beneath them.

No one knows if the last gun has ever been fired. And there is no guarantee that if it were called upon it would actually work. The Artillerymen however believe it is in prime working order and would have no fear using it 'when called upon'.

Security/Military Presence?

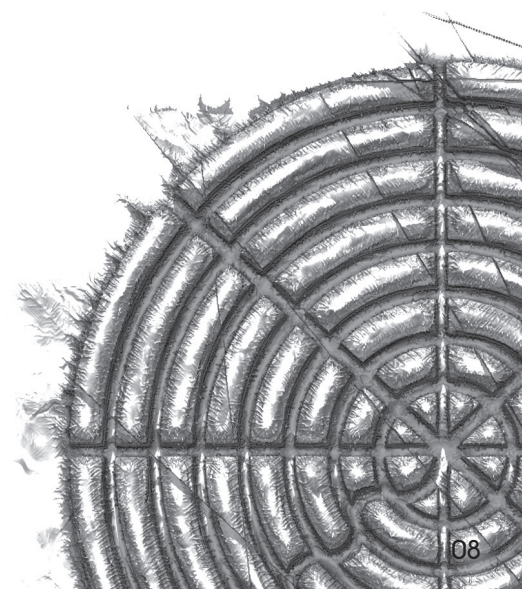
The Gunners patrol the walls of the perimeter, scrambling over the crumbling concrete, powerful sparklocks at the ready. Gaining access to the Guns, the barracks of the underground halls would be no mean feat. Owing to their relatively low numbers and extreme paranoia, the Artillerymen have also devised the crude traps that are scattered about their dwelling. Pits covered with camouflaged sheets of tarpaulin make up the majority of the obstacles, but should an intruder penetrate underground they would encounter several traps of significantly more deadly design.

Highlighted Location

Barrack 13

Description: Barracks for the Artillerymen

The decrepit grey concrete mass of Barrack 13 nestles against the crumbling perimeter wall. Windowless, shabby and imposing, none of the Gunners or Apprentices has ever been allowed into Barrack 13. Only the Artillerymen themselves are allowed within the structure, retiring there to sleep and eat. Amongst the lower ranks the Barrack is talked of in hushed tones. Originally the Artillerymen only wore their gas masks when going down to the shells, but recently they are never seen outside of the Barrack without their faces covered. This has done little to quell speculation regarding the Artillerymen or the activities within their mysterious Barrack.



**Highlighted Personality**

Daniel Keppler, Artilleryman

Age: 66

Height/build: 5'10"

Eye/hair colour: Unknown

Occupation: Radical Artilleryman

Affiliations: None outside of the Artillerymen

Highly-strung, jittery and belligerent, Keppler has been an Artilleryman for a long time; so long in fact that none bar some of his peers can remember when he was just an Apprentice. A rounded, unimposing figure, his appearance has been leant an air of menace by the gas mask he constantly wears. Thirty-two years ago one of the nerve gas shells in the great storage chamber leaked, killing three Artillerymen and two Gunners caught in the hall. Worse than that however was the long-term affects the gas had on all those above ground at the time that were exposed to trace quantities of the toxin. Keppler's skin is red and raw, the flesh constantly being consumed by the toxin even after all these years, constantly painful. Keppler, like the other Artillerymen, has chosen to hide his features rather than face the pity of others. He carries a ceremonial sword like his peers and is often recognisable by his habit of slapping the unsheathed blade against his leg, especially when he is irritated.

Amongst the other Artillerymen Keppler is considered a radical. He believes like his fellows that it is the actions of the unknown enemy that has made The City what it is, but unlike the other Artilleryman he is in favour of firing the 16th Gun immediately. He truly believes that he wishes this to end the horror and drudgery of life in The City, but deep down he relishes the opportunity to inflict pain, even if it is on an enemy has cannot see.



An a|state fiction piece about soldiers in the Contested Grounds.

The shining reputation of the Brigade of Light is revealed to be not all it could be by a visit from a legendary lady.

A|STATE

Generals and Majors

by Malcolm Craig

This is my story of the day the General came.

It was snowing. Typical really, us stuck in the gun pits, up to our knees in filth and it starts to snow. The outline of the Flak Tower was gone, lost in the grey swirls. I was trying to warm up a bit, huddled around the brazier in our alleged command post with a mug of tea and a pipe. The doc was trying to sort young Hadecker's wounds. He's just a boy, only here a few days. The Captain shouldn't have sent him out on patrol into the Traps. We lost seven men, eight if you count the fact that Hadecker came back raving and screaming. Now he's tied to a makeshift operating table. A boy raised on stories of the Brigade. Bet he never thought it would be like this.

The Captain is away again. Never here these days, always down by the docks with the tarts and booze. Leaves me to keep the company running. Bastard. Rabbett was cleaning his gun for the tenth time today. Probably just as well. Nothing works properly out here after a few days. Everyone junks their magnetic repeaters and stuff after a while and buys cartridge rifles and shotguns from the scavs. Rabbett got himself a big old bolt action, huge thing with a bore you could stick your middle finger down. Goes off for days looking for Hirplakker officers to kill. Maniac. Our maniac though.

We should really have been keeping air watch but nobody really cares any more. Came as a surprise when a big aerostat hammered down through the snow and started blowing a gale around us. I got the troops moving, stiff joints creaking, cold limbs gradually warming up, tired eyes opening wide. Then they came out of the aerostat. A platoon of Tentenel troopers in shining white. They formed a cordon around the aerostat, silent apart from the crunching of gravel beneath their feet. Behind them came a gaggle of colonels and majors, long, warm coats and braided caps. Staff officers, not combat leaders, they look tense and uncomfortable.

A tall colonel marched over and shouted about who was in charge. I said it was me, I was in charge. 'Where's your CO?' he says. Probably shagging some girl, I says. Then he goes ballistic, starts yelling at us to form up, that we're a disgrace to the Brigade, we should be ashamed of ourselves, where were our weapons, why aren't we in full uniform, where is the rest of the company, blah, blah, blah. It's funny, though, how quietly the Tentenels can move. The trooper just tapped the colonel on his shoulder and made a placatory motion with his finger and pointed to the ramp of the aerostat.

There was a woman standing there. Far too svelte and elegant to be here in the 'Grounds. She wore a plain peaked cap and a deep, rich fur-lined coat. She walked towards us, glancing about, taking stuff in. Then she stopped and looked at the doc and Hadecker. Poor Hadecker was well gone. The woman walked over and spoke to doc. She took off her coat. Underneath was a plain Brigade uniform, no medals or braid. She laid her coat over Hadecker, then cradled his head like a mother might, whispering in his ear. One of his arms had got loose and he clung to her like baby. The colonels and majors shifted nervously. The woman put Hadecker's head down gently and motioned to two Tentenels. They lifted the table easily and carried poor Hadecker into the aerostat.

She looked around for a bit, then picked up a dirty old coat that someone had slung in a corner and put it on. The colonels and majors were even more nervous now. The one who had been raving at us was motioned back into the aerostat like a sullen youth, muttering to himself. Then the General came up and spoke to me. The General! Talking to me, a sergeant! She was beautiful.

The General asked what the position was, why we didn't have our issue weapons, why we all looked so starved and depressed. I said, well ma'am, things ain't good round here. She said I shouldn't call her ma'am, just General would do. Or Miss van den Haas if I didn't want to stand on ceremony. Took me aback, that did. Never thought she would be like this. You hear about her, all cold and aloof, alone, uncaring. She's not like that at all. She spoke to me like an equal. Better than that, she spoke to me like she respected me.

I went over everything; dispositions, supplies, manpower, command. Just let it all come out. One of the Majors started poking through our stuff, pushing sacks and bags aside with his cane. The General didn't seem happy, telling him to stop interfering with things and looking at property that wasn't his. She asked my name. Not my surname, but my first name. Bethany, I says. She smiled at me and asked if she could have some tea. I told it was just common soldiers' tea, nothing fancy. She smiled again and said if it was good enough for the common soldiers, then it was good enough for her. Garretson brought her a mug. When she thanked him, he looked like he'd just been promoted to General himself.

One of the Tentenels raised a gun and fired. Out in the snow, there was a brief scream. They scare me, those Tentenels. I know how the 'lakkers must have felt facing them. Sergeant, she said, are you telling me you lead this company instead of your Captain? Well, I says, there's a not a lot I can do. Someone's got to keep this lot in line, sure as shit the Captain ain't gonna do it. Anyways, the Captain's never here. Always down at the docks,

selling off our supplies so he can keep his tarts happy. Sold off our last case of mortar bombs the other day.

One of the Colonels said that they had better be moving on, that it was too dangerous round here and they had other positions to inspect. The General said that he could ram his inspection up his arse. That gave the troops a laugh. Didn't make the Colonel happy, though. Sergeant, she says, you and your company are getting pulled out of here, you need a rest. Well, the boys and girls fair cheered at that. Chance for a hot bath and some decent food. I'll see to it you get proper treatment, she said, you mark my words.

Then she turned and went. But before she left, she said it would just be one more day, if we could hold on. Then she said we would be getting a new commanding officer, that the Captain was out of a job and he could stay with his tarts for the rest of his life if he wanted. Bethany, she said, Bethany, you're getting a field promotion. You're the Captain now.

That was the day I met the General.

Field Inspection Report

Access Level: 17.0
From: van den Haas, K (Gen.)
Subject: Troops (morale, living conditions, Contested Grounds)

Refer To: NA
To: Brigade, Command

Following my recent tour of inspection to our units stationed in the Contested Grounds, I would like to draw your attention to a number of factors which I believe are inhibiting the wellbeing and combat effectiveness of our men and women in the field.

Firstly, many of our field commanders have become lax, complacent and, to be frank, totally unwilling to take any responsibility for the welfare of those under their command. Let me not mince words: all officers have a duty of care towards their soldiers that must be of prime priority if we are to maintain our standing as an effective military force. The actions and inactions of some officers is completely beyond the pale and action must be taken forthwith.

Secondly, the quality of our field equipment is not all that we had hoped. Far too many officers and development engineers have spent precious little time in the field (if any time at all) and this is demonstrated by the abject failure of many of our most highly regarded weapons systems. I witnesses many first-line troops resorting to purchasing their own weapons on the black market, weapons which were manifestly unsuited to their position as members of the Brigade of Light.

Finally, I would like to commend to you one Captain (field commission) Bethany Fleck. It is my unwavering belief that this officer should be placed in a position where her experience and intelligence can be made best use of.

We must act upon what I have seen in the Contested Grounds and we must act now if we are to save our reputation, our positions and the lives of our soldiers.

Yours
van den Haas



A|STATE

The Science of Sparklocks

by **Rab Robertson**

from original concepts by Simon Proctor and Mark Whalley.

Excerpt from a lecture by Clayton Allinder, senior armourer and lecturer at the TCMAA Provost training centre.

'OK, settle down.'

'Right. Weapons familiarisation, week 2. Previous lectures have dealt with hand weapons: sticks, knives and so forth. We will now go on to discussing firearms, their uses, dangers and construction.'

'We begin with the ubiquitous Sparklock.'

'The Sparklock is the weapon of choice for thugs, gang members, gamblers and pretty much every other minor criminal you'll meet. As such, you must become intimately familiar with its method of operation and construction.'

'The Sparklock is a simple device. Powder and bullet are rammed down the barrel with the powder being ignited by a spark of electricity from the capacitors mounted on the device. The capacitors are supplied with a charge from batteries, either mounted on the device or strapped to the wearer, which are usually charged by a small clockwork generator. Capacitors are used due to the high voltage necessary to create the spark; a battery that could supply similar levels of voltage would not be portable and could be lethal.'

'Any questions?'

'Yes, Sinclair.'

'Sir, why use batteries at all? Why not just use capacitors, sir?'

'Good question!'

'The capacitor discharges fully with each shot, meaning it has to be recharged every time the weapon is fired. With a battery this is easy: connect the battery to the capacitor, let it charge and remove the battery. Fast and effective. Without a battery the user has to re-wind the clockwork and let it charge the capacitor, slowing him down. In addition, capacitors need a very high initial current to charge them, and batteries can supply this easily unlike a clockwork generator: high current demands act as a brake, slowing or even stalling a clockwork generator.'

'Does that answer your question Sinclair?'

'Sir, yes sir.'

'Good, sit down son.'

'Now, capacitors.'

'Most of the devices you'll encounter on the street will use 'wet' capacitors: devices utilising a fluid known as an electrolyte, hence the 'wet' designation. These types of capacitor provide a high degree of storage in a small package. Without them, capacitors of sufficient capacity would be brick sized, rendering Sparklocks unwieldy, but they aren't devoid of drawbacks'

'1 – The electrolyte. The fluid in these capacitors generally contains acid, ammonium, sodium and alcohol. This is a highly corrosive, poisonous and flammable combination and if the device leaks, especially into the firing chamber, the results are unpleasant.'

'2 – Charge retention. Due to their method of construction, these devices 'leak' charge. Some devices can go from fully charged to empty in a matter of minutes, limiting their usefulness.'

'3 – Polarity. These devices are polarised, fitting one of them backwards effectively short-circuits the battery, which usually leads to overheating, explosion and often death. The batteries themselves generally contain acid, so the result can be messy for those around the weapon.'

A lecture on how sparklocks work in the a|state RPG.

The article has been written by Rab Robertson, who is an engineer by profession,

Rab assures us that everything in this article could actually work...

'4 – Explosion. These devices can explode, overcharging—accompanied by a high pitched whine—and overheating, age and insulation breakdown can all result in the device rupturing. The better made devices have a vent that allows the gasses to escape, hopefully away from the user's face, but most are cheaply made and have a tendency to explode, with the expected results: blindness, missing fingers, acid-fused stumps where your hand was, interesting hairstyles and a very unpleasant taste in one's mouth.'

'All in all, very nasty devices. Yes, Sinclair, what is it?'

'Well sir, if these devices are so dangerous, why use them, why not use superconductors? My father bought me a powerbike that uses them and they're great, really reliable.'

'Sinclair, have you any idea how rare and expensive those things are? Your father may be able to afford them but the average gang member cannot. These people can barely afford to eat, you idiot. Sit down!'

'Now, on to batteries.'

'You will recall that the majority of batteries are wet cell, using metal plates surrounded by an acid. As with the capacitors, these devices provide a high capacity in a reasonable volume. They can also supply the high current required to charge the capacitors and can withstand thousands of charge/discharge cycles. Of course, they have limitations.'

'1 – Weight. The metal plates in these devices are lead and as such are heavy, making the weapon more difficult to aim and carry.'

'2 – The electrolyte. As with capacitors, the fluid in these things is highly corrosive and although the batteries are sealed, accidents can happen. You do not want to be near one of these things if it decides to burst. Overcharging causes this, usually facilitated by a poorly calibrated recharge

mechanism charging the battery for too long, leading to heat build up, increased internal pressure and ultimately explosion.'

'3 – Venting. Under charging conditions, the battery will vent hydrogen. Normally only small quantities are produced, but if the battery is being charged at too high a current, the gas can build up. Then all it takes is a small spark and you've got yourself an inferno. If the fire reaches the battery, capacitor or the powder then get out of the way and find something to hide behind until the screaming stops.'

'Dry cell batteries do exist, but their method of construction renders them too expensive for your average street thug, although not for Sinclair's 'daddy' no doubt. They are also less robust than wet cells, prone to breaking down internally and can still vent poisonous fumes if overcharged. As such you're extremely unlikely to encounter them.'

'Finally, charging mechanisms.'

'Several methods of charging batteries exist, but they all perform the same task: converting mechanical energy into electrical energy. The most common is the clockwork dynamo: the user winds the main spring and then engages the dynamo, generating electricity used to charge the battery. This is simple, efficient, inexpensive and easy to maintain but with some problems.'

'1 – Overcharging. The mechanism is usually timed to stop before the battery becomes overcharged, but as we all know accidents can happen. The user can over-wind the mechanism or the battery may not be fully discharged, the end result is the same: hot acid everywhere.'

'2 – Fragility. If the main spring goes (say through over winding or fatigue), well let's just say a piece of springy metal whipping across you is going to put a crimp in your day.'

'Another system that has appeared is the ratchet winding mechanism. Though still rare and relatively expensive, this system offers quicker winding than



the normal clockwork system. The barrel and handle are connected via a pivot and can be unlocked so that the barrel can be spun around the handle. This spinning motion is used to drive the dynamo, dispensing with the clockwork mechanism and charging the battery directly. This system is much quicker than the clockwork dynamo, but comes with its own drawbacks.'

'1 – Overcharging. The system supplies much more current and is prone to overcharging, even more so than the standard clockwork dynamo, unless the user is careful to count the number of rotations.'

'2 – Weight. The system has to be extremely robust, the weight of the barrel spinning around means that the pivot and connecting gears have to be strong. It is not unknown for vital components or even the barrel itself to come flying off, leaving the user somewhat exposed.'

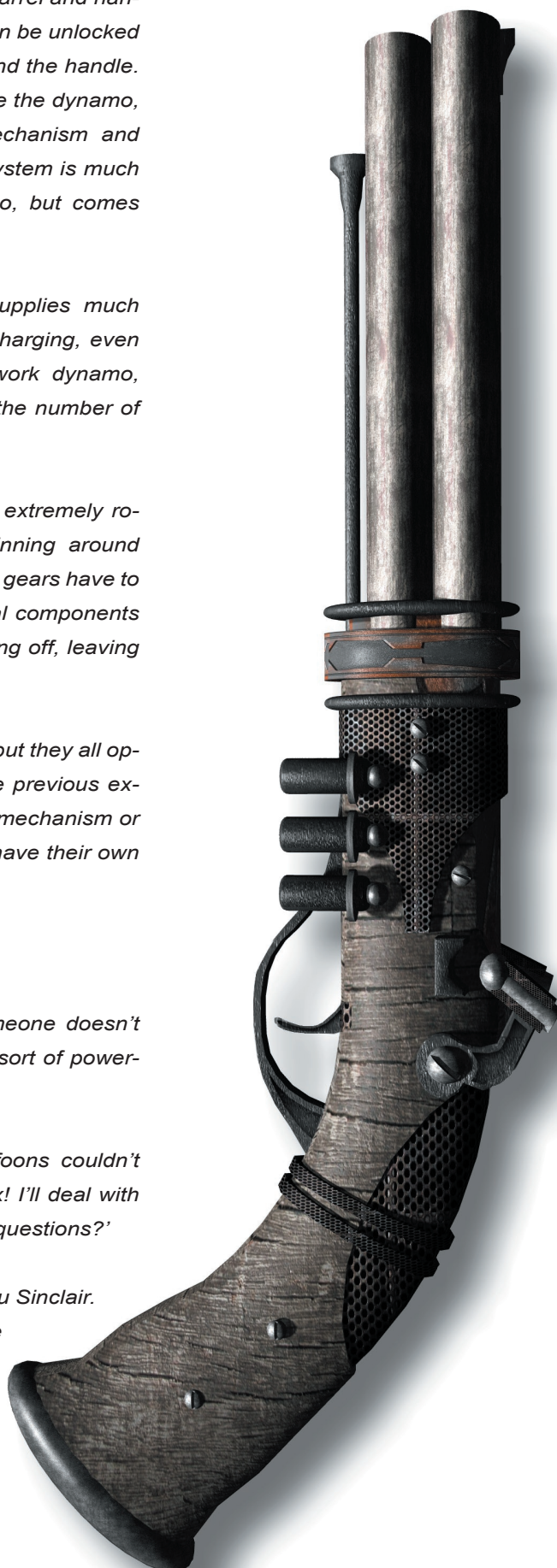
'There are other systems out there, but they all operate on the same principles as the previous examples, either winding a clockwork mechanism or driving the dynamo directly and all have their own particular drawbacks.'

'Sinclair, this better be good!'

'Yes sir, I was wondering why someone doesn't ask the Fulgurators to make some sort of power-pack?'

'Fulgurators! Those half-arsed buffoons couldn't generate their way out of a wet box! I'll deal with you in a minute, Sinclair. Any other questions?'

'No. OK, class dismissed, except you Sinclair. You and I are going to have a little chat about idiot sons of rich men who should learn to keep their mouths shut. It'll be Bankside for you.'





A motley crue of misfits for the a|state RPG.

Not everyone who inhabits the Contested Grounds is a soldier for one of the warring sides. Some are there for more mercenary reasons...

A|STATE

Shard's Scavengers

by Greg Saunders

Status: Army of scavengers who raid the Contested Grounds

Headquarters: Warehouse on the south side of the Grounds

Membership: Anyone who wants to join, typically 20 to 30 scavengers in any one raid

'This came through yesterday. It's from remote obs post 23B.'

Captain Radley looked up at the screens as the technician's fingers flicked over the controls. The darkness faded to be replaced with the green pixelated glow of the observation camera operating in low-light mode. 23B was near the centre of the Contested Grounds; there were no real sources of illumination there. The green image showed the side of a caved-in building. A small crater filled the foreground, the frozen memory of a mortar round. Nothing moved. Then a figure came into sight, moving slowly, gingerly in the darkness. It wore a Hirplakker gene-trooper combat suit and a high-powered assault rifle was clutched in its hands.

There were no sounds; the camera unit was not fitted with a microphone.

'Who is that?' asked Radley.

'Not sure' replied the technician, 'looks like one of ours who got cut off from their squad, probably one of the three unaccounted for after the advance on sector 16 two days ago.'

Radley's eyes returned to the screens. The figure was in the centre now, feeling one foot at a time across the scene. It struggled with the lip of the crater but eventually worked its way down the inner slope. Poor fool.

At that moment other figures appeared. Three at first, then more, stepping from around the sides of the buildings. The central figure had not noticed them in the darkness; obviously they were not making much noise. They were dressed in heavy garments that obscured face and body, making them appear not as people but as some lumbering misshapen creatures. They did not move, they simply gathered around the edge of the clearing, the struggling figure in their centre. Then without warning they rushed forward, a seething black mass of writhing shapes. The first figure was engulfed.

It was mercifully swift. Within minutes the mass had retreated. Two lay motionless; presumably the soldier had managed to kill them. Where the soldier had been there now lay the naked and oddly contorted body of a woman, stripped of possessions, the discolorations on her arms recognisable as poorly resolved gene-trooper bar codes. The other figures stood at the edge of the clearing, waiting.

Another figure entered the area. A tall waspish man dressed in a long flowing overcoat. The light from the cigarette stub protruding from his lips was a bright green flare on the consoles. Strangely pointed objects covered his eyes; a set of low light goggles. He walked nonchalantly over to the body of the woman and prodded it with his foot, looking down. The woman was motionless. Taking a final draw on his cigarette the man flicked the stub on to the woman's body and turned. With a quick motion he signalled the others and strode from camera view. The others followed leaving the woman's corpse alone in the crater.

Radley turned from the screens. 'Get me the commander,' he said.

Overview

For the lowest of the low, life in The City can be brutal, violent and often very short. Food is not easy to come by, the streets are rife with disease and even drinking water comes at a price.



However, you can gamble with the only thing you do have, your life, courting death for the sake of continuing your miserable existence just a little longer. If you 'choose' that option, then Shard might be the man for you. Self-styled 'Captain' Shard will accept you into the fold for nothing, and providing you work for him he will feed you enough to live on. For some, it's a start. For most, it's the end.

Shard runs a scavenging operation in the Contested Grounds, stealing dumped equipment and selling it on the black market for a tidy profit. He is not adverse to a more forceful method of acquisition, providing that the target is soft, relatively unarmed and carries equipment worthy of the risk. He has three deputies, Fisk, Pollock and Sleath, who actually carry out the raids into the war zone for him. However, like the good captain these men don't engage in dangerous activities within the Grounds, that is left to Shard's 'troopers'.

Degenerates, scum and all manner of desperate people swell the ranks of Shard's force, fighting with club, brick and bare hands for the sake of a morsel of food. Shard's rules are simple – steal something of worth from the Grounds and you'll get fed. Steal something from another of Shard's men and you die. Steal something from Shard and you die. It's as simple as that.

Organisation

Shard and his deputies operate out of a warehouse bordering on the south side of the Grounds, although the actual site is a closely guarded secret. When a raid is to take place his troops gather a pre-determined meeting point, with one of the deputies arriving to signal the advance into the Grounds. Once the raid is over the force leave the Grounds (usually minus a good proportion of the men involved) via another pre-determined point and the other deputies hand out food to those survivors they think have earned it. Each of the deputies has a wide arsenal of hi-tech weaponry from the Grounds with which to uphold any judgements.

If you want to work for Shard, simply find out where the next meet is. The information is usually not that hard to come by as both Arclight and Hirplakker are usually too busy with each other to bother with a small operator like Shard. None of his troopers know the location of Shard's warehouse and in fact the majority have no idea what he even looks like. Only the most trusted individuals such as his deputies are permitted to meet Shard.

Shard gets on well with the 3rd Syndicate who buy weapons from him and also act to keep the other gangs at bay. So far, this relationship has worked well. However, recently Shard's activities are becoming more widespread and both the Macrocorps fighting in the Contested Grounds are secretly expressing concern. Both are toying with removing Shard altogether, although it is likely that his 3rd Syndicate connections would oppose such action.

Security Forces

Shard relies on his deputies and a small contingent of 3rd Syndicate thugs to act as his security team; none of the troopers knows where Shard operates. Shard is obsessive about his security and he is perfectly willing to relocate his operation should its location become known. All in all about 10 heavily armed and combat-experienced people work for Shard and can be found at his warehouse.

Max Shard

Age: 42
Height/Build: 5'10"/Muscular
Eye/Hair Colour: Blue/Grey
Occupation: Operator of scavenger gang
Affiliations: 3rd Syndicate

Max Shard spent three years serving Arclight including action in the One Hundred Block War and in the Contested Grounds. When his unit was virtually destroyed during a siege on one of the flak towers Shard decided that he had been through enough.



Deserting the remains of his squad he made his way out of the Grounds and back into The City. However, like many who have witnessed the confined urban warfare of the Grounds he found himself irresistibly drawn back, unable and unwilling to escape the engulfing horror of warfare. Knowing there was no way he could return to his former employers, Shard considered other ways he could profit from the Contested Grounds. Slowly, over the period of a year Shard's scavenger operation was born.

A taut, nervous man with close-cropped iron-grey hair and an intense unyielding stare, Shard still sees himself as a military man and carries himself as such though no others are aware of his background. He likes to refer to himself as 'Captain Shard'; unconsciously feeling that by referring to his operation in military terms somehow makes it legitimate. The 3rd Syndicate see him for what he is – a slightly twisted individual obsessive about urban warfare, but a useful obsessive none the less.

Samuel Fisk

Age: 32
Height/Build: 5'9"/Slender
Eye/Hair Colour: Blue/Bald
Occupation: One of Shard's deputies
Affiliations: 3rd Syndicate

Fisk is one of Shard's deputies and is generally considered to be his right-hand man. A nervous, excitable individual, Fisk along with Pollock and Sleath travels into the Contested Grounds with the Scavenger teams, selecting suitable targets, overseeing their 'work' and ensuring that they surrender everything they steal, with a little help from his Gorunna 'Sling' Heavy Pistol.

Shard likes Fisk because he has proved himself to be trustworthy and because Fisk is happy to pander to Shard's military aspirations. Fisk himself couldn't care less about Shard's organisation or getting rich and has not even considered stealing from Shard, he has his own reasons to justify his

actions. During the One Hundred Block War his family home was 'neutralised' by Arclight Tentenel troopers, an act which the macrocorp has yet to acknowledge, let alone apologise for. Since then, Fisk has been searching for some way to get back at the organisations that he feels conspired to destroy his family. He considers that watching macrocorp soldiers get mauled to death by desperate degenerates in the Contested Grounds is probably the best revenge he is going to get.

Renk

Age: Unknown
Height/Build: 5'1"/Difficult to say under his rags
Eye/Hair Colour: Brown/black
Occupation: Long time Scavenger
Affiliations: None

Renk is a pitiful sight. Wrapped head to foot in rags and torn pieces of clothing, he shuffles about the City, begging from money from which to feed his Scrape addiction. No one is sure how old he is, to everyone else he's just another wasted Jake laying in the detritus at the side of the road. But unlike so many of his kind, Renk has an income. He is one of Shard's longest serving scavengers and never fails to materialise at the appointed time on the outskirts of the Contested Grounds, ready to fight to earn his food.

Once within the twisted, blasted ruins of the Contested Grounds Renk moves with surprising speed and agility, as if fuelled by something other than a desire to eat. He is always in the first wave to attack and carries out his work with a frenzied abandon which makes his compatriots wonder why he hasn't been killed yet. In reality Renk sees scavenging as a way out, a way to die without actually having to commit suicide. In his dark and fevered dreams he prays for a death that has so far eluded him.



New equipment
and items for the
a|state RPG.

This issue we look
at some of the
natural remedies
that might be
useful when you
get into a bit of a
scrape.

BALMS & POTIONS

by **Malcolm Craig**

There are times in The City when combat is simply unavoidable. In such a situation, wounds of some kind are inevitable and there is a need for some form of medical aid. Hitech solutions are rare and hideously expensive, so the apothecaries and physicians of The City have become adept at blending various plants, animal products and chemicals to make a variety of medicines, balms and potions.

The techniques and ingredients utilized by herbalists and apothecaries vary widely across The City. From burgh to burgh, the names of similar potions and curatives may be markedly different, leading to no little amount of confusion for those in desperate need of medical care and attention. Often, the needy individual will simply state the kind of medicine they require and an apothecary will make up an appropriate concoction according to his or her own recipe.

Here are a number of the most common herbs and compounds used by those who put themselves in harm's way. The three items detailed below are extremely widespread and the names and contents remain constant far and wide across The City. The prices given are approximate and will vary according to local demand, availability of the ingredients and the apparent need of the supplicant (apothecaries and herbalists are not well known for their overly generous natures and spirit of giving).

Brickwall Balm

Concocted from a variety of fungi that grow on the damp walls of brick tenements, this balm has moderate local anaesthetic properties if placed on the skin and causes deep drowsiness if ingested. Commonly used when performing small operations, the subject still feels a certain amount of sensation, but feelings of pain are dulled.

The damp fungi are prepared by thoroughly pound-

ing the spores in a pestle and mixing with refined fish oil to create a thick, glutinous mass. This can be applied directly to the skin, but needs to be diluted with more oil for ingestion.

Cost: 7s for a wrap (enough to cover a 10x10cm area of skin or to provide maximum effect through ingestion)

Mudlark's Rashweed

Found growing in the silt and mud of the most polluted canals, Mudlark's Rashweed has some splendid properties which make it one of the most highly prized plants in herbalist circles.

When dried, powdered and mixed with clean water to form a smooth paste, the plant has excellent antiseptic qualities, as well as promoting more rapid healing of wounds.

Cost: 10s for a small bottle (enough to cover 4-5 small bullet wounds or knife scars)

Stookie Clay

Often sold in brick-like blocks weighing about half a kilo, Stookie Clay is a carefully measured combination of canal mud and a variety of plants and spores. Many apothecaries keep their own private recipes for Stookie Clay closely guarded secrets, but the general make-up of the stuff is well-known outside of those rarified professional circles.

To apply the clay, it must be combined with clean water to form a thick, muddy paste. This is then applied to a limb that has been fractured or otherwise wounded. The clay dries and hardens very quickly, protecting the wound or supporting the fracture until it heals. The combination of plants in the clay help to stave off infection and promote healthy growth of new skin.

Many people wrap bandages round layers of Stookie Clay to make a more solid, durable cast over a broken limb. This results in a heavy, but remarkably long lasting, shield for damaged limbs.

Cost: 5s for one block (enough to cover a lower arm with one layer of clay)



Flora & Fauna

by Mark Whalley

Here are just a few of the fishes that swim through the canals of The City.

Rag Fish

These elusive eel-like fish inhabit all The City's canals, but are rarely encountered. A fully grown predatory Rag Fish is 4 feet long and thick as a man's leg. They are not fussy eaters and will bite anything that comes within reach, be it fish, dog or man.

Their aggressive attitude (bite first, bite second, don't ask any questions) isn't all that makes these fish feared. Their breeding habits are more terrifying.

Like most fish, the female lays her eggs in large clumps and the male then fertilises them. The difference is that the eggs are much smaller than expected, and form a white mist in the water. Anyone drinking infected water becomes a host for the eggs. Over the following weeks the eggs hatch and the tiny young feed on the host's flesh. Working their way throughout the body, they slowly grow within the host.

Entering their second phase of birth they produce toxin. This gives the host a parching thirst and a drying of the skin. This continues until the host becomes so overcome with dry-itching pain that they jump into a body of water. At the most desperate point young inch-long Rag Fish can sometimes be seen just below the skin.

If the host does not immerse themselves in water then within a week or two the young Rag Fish die, poisoning the host often fatally. Madness is another side effect of resisting the compulsion of the Rag Fish toxin.

If the host is surrounded by water the Rag Fish then enter the final cycle of birth: they burrow out through the host's skin. The body of the host often provides food for the rapidly growing young along with anyone in the water nearby.

Occasionally someone survives the 'hatching,' though their skin is horribly scarred.

Adult Rag Fish

REA: 40% RES: 3 AV: 2
Bite: 40% (Pen: 10, Dam: 4)
Swim/Manoeuvre: 85%

Other Fishes

Bloaters

These fat fish swim in the middle depths of the canals feeding on whatever they can. These are not aggressive fish, but they are dangerous, as their scales have a light covering of toxic slime. The toxin causes a rash and swelling, in extreme cases causing skin to split open.

Some hunt Bloaters for their slime, as placed within food or drink it causes throats to swell, suffocating the victim. The poison has POT 13.

Cudders

These are bottom feeders up to 3 feet long living on the decomposing wastes covering the bottoms of the canals. Their bodies are wide and flat along their underside, and raising to a narrow ridge, often spined, along the top. Colours range from dark brown to black. Their mouths are rounded, with two sets of opposing jaws, allowing them to grind down the toughest of meals.

They develop nodules upon their skin, where a scratch or lost scale has caused an infection. These can be removed and cleaned to show a white substance. If polished it has a pearlescent shimmer and is used in jewellery.

Scimmers

Typically 6 inches in length, these flat fish have a spotty upper surface and a pale underbelly. They skim along the surface of the water, feeding on algae. They swim in loose shoals of several dozen, and when threatened will swim in fast twirling patterns. Though not large, they are tasty.

Line Fish

Medium sized fishes up to a foot long, with females half the size of males. Colour tends to be grey with a mottling of blues, reds and greens along the sides of the males. These are the most common fish that citizens catch for food. Several hours fishing can catch between 0 and 4 fish, depending on the skill of the fisherman, and the condition of the canal.

'Flora & Fauna' is a regular column for a|state, looking at the various plants and creatures found in The City.

This is Mark Whalley's first piece for 'The Circular'.

Mark contributed the 'Ghostfighter Coat' to the Ghostfighter supplement for a|state.



Anti-Social Gaming?

by **Brian Nisbet**

Not content to be pigeon-holed into a particular topic or area, I managed, with typical Irish guile, to persuade the benevolent Editor [Indeed – Ed.] to grant me leave to discuss a wide array of subjects in this column, and this I intend to do. The intention is for there to be some link, however tangential, from column to column, but I cannot swear that events may not overtake me and that some truly marvellous subject matter may make itself known to me at the last moment and so derail my carefully thought out plan.

In this first column I intend to touch, as deeply as space allows, on the subject of 'anti-social gaming.' By this I mean occasions or types of gaming that the average gamer considers to be anti-social. Gaming is, by its very nature, a social hobby.

There are few non-computer games that one can play entirely on one's own and even they are arguably most enjoyable when other humans are involved. However it is these very games that currently seem to spark the most ire. To be more specific it is the genre of games known as Massively Multiplayer Online RPGs (MMORPGs). These are games that, while you can play them without ever exchanging a word with another human player, assume interaction with other PCs and allow for social interaction on a scale unimaginable by any gamer I knew when I started gaming over 20 years ago. Yet those who play them regularly are looked down upon by many other gamers and are, often, accused of being anti-social.

For example, in the majority of cases if someone could not join you on an evening out due to a

game then most gamers would nod understandingly and possibly, in the case of good friends, apologise for forgetting that Wednesday is their weekly game night. However, in the case of MMORPGs an answer of 'No, sorry, I'm meeting up with my party online and going questing,' is met with derisory comments about loners and the opinion that online gaming isn't 'real.' Equally, while overlong stories about any character or campaign may become boring, the threshold seems that much lower for online games. Many gamers of my acquaintance have dismissed such stories as 'oh God, are you talking about that game again?' That game, by the way, is, at the moment, Blizzard's most fabulous World of Warcraft, but the attitude and comments apply equally to any MMORPG. There is, it would seem, absolutely no benefit to be gained by playing these games. You are being anti-social by not coming out or going to visit them and that is that.

Of course 'that' is most certainly not that. As I mentioned the MMORPGs of today give gamers access to worlds unthinkable even 10 years ago. The growth of the internet has widened the possible social circle of the world to encompass a player base far, far wider than any of us could have ever squeezed around our kitchen tables. And as with any game given the right mix of players and situations the roleplaying experience can be simply mind-blowing.

'We are gamers, a group foolishly and unfairly derided as being anti-social by vast portions of society...'

We are gamers, a group foolishly and unfairly derided as being anti-social by vast portions of society, perhaps we should not assign those labels quite so easily to others. In fact we are being very, very

social indeed, but in a way that is only possible in the 21st Century. While it does mean putting aside our precious books for a moment or two we still have our chance to stake a decent claim in these digital dreamworlds, before they are completely filled with those who write without vowels and who believe that roleplaying involves asking other players if they want to 'cyber.' Join us, it's a fight worth winning. ☺

World of Warcraft is available for PC and Mac:
<http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/>

Brian Nisbet is a regular columnist for 'The Circular'. He has written for White Wolf's Exalted as well as for aJstate.

Brian's favourite drink usually involves very, very cold Swedish vodka. The mixer is negotiable but absinthe has been the most interesting one so far.



M o b J u s t i c e

Welcome to the Family Way.

An introduction to the world of Mob Justice by **Iain McAllister**

Antonio stumbled over cardboard boxes, protesting drunks and prostitutes, pushing himself ever harder as the G-man gained on him down the cold, narrow Chicago alley. He had to get back, the things he had seen the Boss needed to know. Triads meeting with the FBI and the CIA. The possibilities behind such an alliance were terrifying.

Emerging into a main street he jumped into the nearest car, forcing the driver out on to the street, and speeding away in the old Ford. The G-man dusted himself down, adjusted his hat and walked calmly to the nearest telephone box. There was always a solution.

A short and frantic car journey later Antonio 'Weasel' Carnelly, burst through the Boss' door. 'Boss, Boss you should see the things I've seen. The triads met with these G-men in the Red Corset...' his voice trailing off as he noticed the gun pointing at him in the Boss' hand.

The boss put down the phone and pulled the trigger. 'That, Weasel, is a secret'

The rain falls heavy in the streets of America. Couples splash through the puddles, winding their wicked way to the speakeasies that cover every town, city and state like a teenager's acne. Gangsters and politicians rub shoulders in the dark recesses of fashionable

bars, passing notes under the table like naughty school children. The lives of millions decided on the back of a napkin. The moral folk, the good folk stay locked up at night, fearful of everything and everyone. Still it rains. Heavy, plodding rain. Nature trying to rub America off the map drop by drop: ashamed of what has become of a once-grand nation.

America: a once-proud nation ruled by the gangs that profit daily from the common man's desire to have a drink. In the early 1920s the Volstead Act became law, prohibiting the sale of alcohol across America. Man, however, has always been resourceful, and those who took advantage and sold illicit liquor, dubbed 'bootleggers', became millionaires overnight. The roaring 20s were fuelled by illicit booze, but by the early 30s the 'Great Experiment' was failing.

Then they arrived. European investors with suitcases full of money eager to invest in America, for only one condition: prohibition had to stay. With a depression on the horizon America badly needed investment and embraced the offer with open arms. It wasn't long before every home had a piece of 'Laconi' in it: from washing machines to cars.

The prohibition advocates, the 'drys', rejoiced as their 'Great Experiment' was rescued from failure, deifying it as the first steps of a truly civilised society, blind to the corruption it had already caused and the troubles it would birth. America celebrated becoming the first truly moral nation, but behind closed doors the Mafia, long the major supplier of illicit booze, rubbed its collective hands.





As World Wars I and II faded into the past, and America isolated itself evermore from a world it did not want, or care to, understand, the Mafia slowly lost its dominant position in the American underworld. Triad, Yakuza, Mexican, British and American gangs all wanted a piece of the lucrative bootlegging pie and they weren't asking nicely. Long ignored by the Mafia, these smaller gangs slowly gained ground and gang wars became a common feature of life in America.

The law enforcement agencies that are meant to 'serve and protect' do anything but. Corruption and self interest rule the organisations that are meant to hold aloft and defend the American ideal, putting money and power before the good of the people. There are some exceptions and some fight the Mafia and its fellow criminal organisations, those who can no longer stand the corruption becoming Private Investigators and Vigilantes, determined to fight the only way these people know how: outside the law.

The rest of the world continues unabated. The International Coalition Of Nations, ICON, set up by the British and Russian alliance that ended the Second World War, has continued to grow and assist the rebuilding of Europe. Russia is now a fully realised superpower along with Britain and ICON is the police of this new world order. Until

recently America has had no part to play in this organisation, but with calmer heads prevailing it looks as if they will once more join the world stage, hoping for a new period of cooperation, understanding and profit making.

Politicians jump on the prohibition bandwagon for fear of being left behind, leaving only their morale rectitude and principles on the road as they scramble onboard. A few fight, trying to make their way through the dark night, shining beacons of what could be should Americans stand for what they know is right. Their path is hard however and the lobbyists in Washington hold great power and large amounts of cash to tempt the good to the grey area between corruption and contribution.

As America approaches 2004 its conservatively minded philosophy is clashing with those who look

to the outside world as a place of opportunities and new ideas. The advent of the internet only 10 years ago has brought about a fundamental and revolutionary change. The boiling pot of cultural diversity in the lower classes and the jet-setters in the upper classes are slowly opening the eyes of the American public to a new world. Not everyone likes what they see.

No one can doubt the world is reaching a crux of change but America sits isolated and fearful of its imagined enemies. People are afraid to go outside, the government is afraid to act against the gangs and everyone is afraid of what might happen if America opens its borders once more. One thing is certain: the war is on our doorsteps, and no one can avoid it.

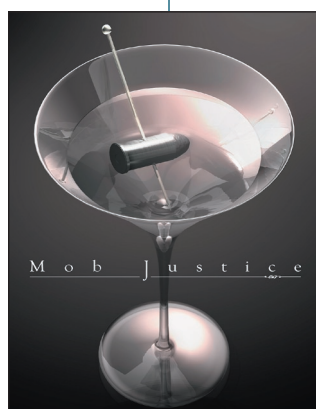
Overview of Rules

Mob Justice is a game of gangsters and gals in an era of illicit booze, conspiracy and rampant gang warfare. The system reflects this through a poker-based mechanic, and a combat system that is real time, very visual and paperwork light, allowing for the GM to concentrate on action and storytelling.

Character creation is quick and simple, allowing for the creation of bold, film-style characters that perfectly reflect the noir setting of the game-world. A stature and reputation system allows characters to progress to the highest echelons of power whilst keeping track of their contacts through a flexible but structured resource system.

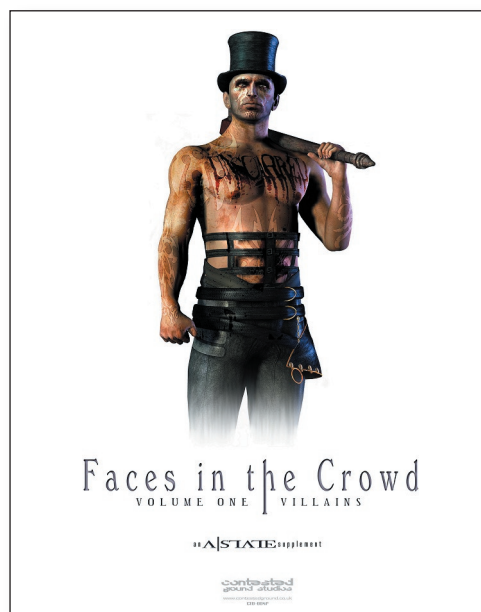
Mob Justice is designed to be accessible to all levels of player and GM, from people completely new to the hobby to experienced veterans. It allows players to climb all the way to the top of the criminal ladder or to try and bring it down and stand against the tide.

Mob Justice
You're Family





Upcoming releases from Contested Ground Studios



Faces in the Crowd

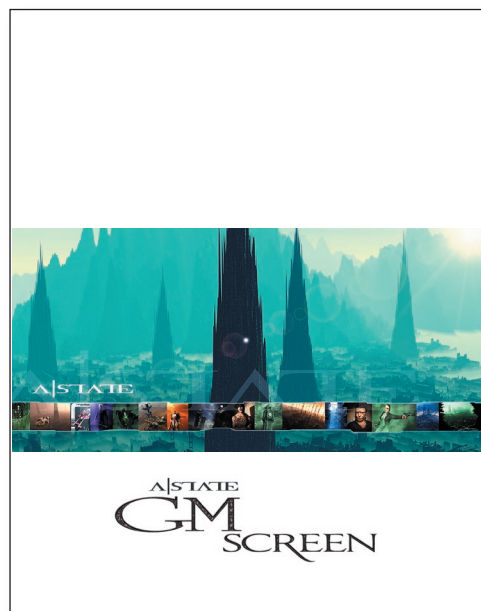
VOLUME ONE VILLAINS

Be careful as you wander through the avenues and alleyways of The City, for you never know whom you might chance across...

'Faces in the Crowd: Volume 1, Villains' is the first in a series of PDFs for the a|state RPG which detail some of the unusual and interesting characters to be found in the urban maze.

As the title suggests, Volume 1 concentrates on the more unpleasant people that might cross your character's path. With 10 fully stated NPCs, complete with full-page illustrations, each installment of 'Faces in the Crowd' is set to be an invaluable addition to your a|state games.

Format: PDF, Colour cover, B&W internal art **Page Count:** 36pp **RRP:** \$4.95US **ISBN:** N/A **Release Date:** August, 2005



A|STATE

GM SCREEN

Designed to give you all the information you need at your fingertips when running a|state, this new PDF GM screen allows you to print it out as many times as you want and mount it either on card or in one of the many blank GM screen holders available.

The front of the screen features a full-width rendering of Calculus Tor, inset with some of the iconic images from a|state. The interior features charts and tables relevant to the game.

And in addition, the downloadable pack also features ten new adventure nuggets for you to base adventures on!

Format: PDF, Colour Panels **Page Count:** 11pp **RRP:** \$2.95US **ISBN:** N/A **Release Date:** August, 2005

Both these releases will be available to download from www.rpgnow.com. Also available from the same site are our existing PDF releases 'Ghostfighter' and the PDF version of 'The Lostfinders Guide to Mire End' (also available in print format as well).



the Central Idea

by **Iain McAllister**

Well I've finally made it. Kind of. Three years ago I came up with the idea for a game involving modern day 1920s-style gangsters. The title I came up with, and the one that has stuck, is 'Mob Justice' and it began life as an overly complex card game. Designing games, playing with mechanical ideas and writing are my escapes away from work, and I had designed a couple of small card games and Games Mastered a lot of Deadlands, 7th Sea and WFRP before I took on the task of designing an RPG. I quickly discovered that doing so is an incredibly hard, at times daunting, and very imprecise craft. So I offer my experiences and advice to help you avoid the pitfalls I fell into and hopefully assist you in designing the RPG you dream of playing and running.

I began simply with an idea. A single idea drove me to create Mob Justice: a modern-day mobster RPG. It is important to hold your central idea foremost in your mind when you are designing or writing anything, for if you lose sight of it then you will be left with something messy and unfocused [No comment – Ed.]. I will not quote examples, as I am only one man with my own opinions of game design and I am admittedly very new to all of this.

From the idea all other parts of your game design should spring: system, background, character creation, etc. For instance my idea is: modern-day mobsters.

So my first question to myself is how do I do that? Looking to America first as that is where most western gangster films are based and so the mass-market perception of gangsters lies there. I fixed on the 'roaring twenties': prohibition was in full swing and the gangs had the money and power to do what they wanted. So the obvious next question was: what if prohibition never ended? The rest of the background hangs off that.

This is just one example of why sticking to your central idea is so important.

Once your idea is decided your next step is to decide why characters must do things in your world, what plot or background motivates them? What must they do, what sort of adventures will they find themselves embroiled in and what sort of action will occur and how do they do it?

With these central premises established you now need to think about how the players, not the characters, are going to interact with the background. In a computer game this is through the control mechanism and information on screen. In a tabletop RPG it is through the layout and design of the character sheet and the system.

Design of the book follows and how we implement all the previous points into a cohesive structure that makes sense for new player and experienced veteran alike. Finally we must playtest, playtest, and playtest – then playtest some more. You can have the best idea, system and layout in the world, but if you don't iron out the bugs it will look clunky and inelegant. This brings us to my five tenets of game design:

Idea

The central premise

Interface

Why? Plot and Background. What? Action. How? System.

Interaction

How players interact with the background. System design and implementation. Character design and implementation.

Implementation

How you put it together and lay it out.

Ironing Out

Playtesting, playtesting, and playtesting and blind testing.

These are how I am currently thinking about all types of game design: RPG, computer games, card games and board games. It is by no means my final thoughts on the matter but for now, I believe that it is a good basis for all game design. Don't worry about exactly what these things mean at the moment just remember that it all starts with a good idea. 🐞

Iain McAllister is the creator of the upcoming **Mob Justice** RPG and deputy editor of 'The Circular'.

Iain's favourite drink is Malt Whisky, NO ICE, NO WATER. He will also partake of bootleg liquor, the more illegal the better.



EVERLASTING EMPIRE

An introduction to Everlasting Empire
by **Malcolm Craig**

Setting

1898, something fell to Earth in the Sussex countryside. Some feared this to be the herald of an invading armada from beyond. Others thought it to be a cunning foreign plot. Some simply shrugged and went back to reading their newspapers.

The Sussex Enigma was quietly removed from its crater and carefully secreted in the bowels of the British Museum in London. The greatest minds of the day could make neither head nor tail of its workings, of its fantastic complexity and baffling machinery. But those greatest minds worked away, worked over the years attempting to decipher the enigma. Bit by bit they unlocked its secrets and in doing so, created a hegemony that would spread out to the stars.

2098, the British Empire is stronger than ever. Controlling over half of the surface of the Earth, billions of souls pay allegiance to the Union Flag. In the depths of space, British cities stand on planets orbiting alien stars, British dreadnoughts guard the space lanes and ensure the free flow of goods between the colonies.

But the Empire is not without its troubles. Many nations are chafing under the rule of the British, many people seek self-determination and the right to govern themselves. There are grumblings in the extra-terrestrial colonies, as the British outposts witness the freedoms available to the citizens of other great nations.

Threats also come from without. The workers' paradise of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics agitates for greater freedom for the common man. The United States of America seeks greater scope to trade, disrupting British plans and schemes. German Republicans seek to bring down a monarchy closely tied to that of Britain. Everywhere there are threats.

And on to the scene step the characters, loyal servants of the Empire, agents of the shadowy arms of the British Government, seeking to stamp out insurrection, treason and external agitation. But perhaps things are not as black and white as they seem.

For agents are exposed to the dark underbelly of the Empire, the terrors and horrors that do not make the front page of The Times.

How much time is left for the Everlasting Empire?

System

Everlasting Empire will be using a tailored version of the ERPgame system, which was first published in 2001. It is available in its untailored form for free from [That's some sequence of words – Ed.] <http://gregorhutton.com/erp>.

The gaming style is intended to be descriptive and more 'heroic' than 'realistic.' The ruleset is compact, and resolution only involves six-sided dice and simple arithmetic. The emphasis will be on narration and drama, and not on dogma or volumes of rules.

Characters are described by three Characteristics: Steel, Intellect and Resolve. Each of these can be further detailed by four 'Aspects,' should you so wish. For example, Steel encompasses 'dexterity,' 'agility,' 'endurance' and 'strength.'

Characteristic values are typically 3 for normal subjects of the Empire, with PCs having typical values of 4 to 6.

Furthermore, Characteristics can have 'Attributes' associated with them, such as 'Tough' associated with Steel.

Further details of a character's competence are Skills (like Armed Combat) and Gifts (such as Wealth).

The system essentially involves rolling a single six-sided die and adding it to the value of a Characteristic. Aim to achieve a high total. A skill, if relevant to the task, allows an additional die to be rolled and the highest die is added to the Characteristic. An associated Attribute also allows an extra die to be rolled.

Pretty much that is the engine of the system. It's intended to be minimal and transparent, while allowing for fast character creation and conflict resolution. We will, of course, be fitting the system to the setting so that the game is, as far as possible, a coherent gaming experience.

Look out for further updates in future issues of 'The Circular'.





Cat is CGS's accountant and cheeky bit of booth bait. Her column is the regular issue-ender at 'The Circular'.

Cat's favourite drink is coffee. When forced to choose an alcoholic one, she requested a shot of Tia Maria to go with the coffee.

Opening Shots

by Cathriona Tobin

So, could you do an article for The Circular, he said? Sure! I said. I've just designed this spreadsheet, right, and if you input the number of main rulebooks we produce, allowing for expense accrual due according to historical cost convention, it'll give you the return on capital employed – just like that! Hmm, he said thoughtfully. I'm not entirely sure that's the kind of thing our readers are interested in. Okay, I replied, what about a bit on the effect of our autocrat's petrol-guzzling new car [Seat Leon Cupra R, 225 bhp! – Ed.] on my long-term fixed asset depreciation accounts?

Actually, he said, I was thinking you might write something ... less financial. But ... I stammered... I'm the notional accountant! I do the numbers! Other people do the writing – that's what I pay them for! (Then he pointed out that no-one had ever gotten paid, and I had to explain the effects on the bottom line of employee expenses, income tax and PRSI with regard to escalating interest rates and fluctuations in the retail price index, until eventually he gave me some money and left me alone.)

However, with all the fun of bleeding his last pennies from him, I never managed to dissuade him from the idea that I might write something. Curses. As I was looking for ideas from the other articles, I came across Brian's on-the-ball bit about MMORPGs. Estimates for the number of World of Warcraft players are coming in at somewhere around the one million mark, which is a hell of a lot more people than you're ever likely to meet down the pub or at your FLGS.

And it is a great way to provoke sociability; while the malodorous, corpulent Bob from Idaho isn't someone you would want to spend a great deal of time with in real life, his six-foot, busty blonde

elf character on WoW means Bob's never short of friends anymore, and now that he eats at his computer his mom is forced to engage in conversation when she brings it up to his bedroom.

And then there are the other advantages to social interaction that are only available to online RPGers – stuck for witty banter? Google for some, then copy and paste into your conversation window – instant comedian! Paralysed in real-life interactions by your overly large nose/bad acne/milk-bottle glasses? Just draw up a gorgeous character – instant stud! And the best part is, no-one needs ever know that you're just Bob – to the thousands of other players, you will always be a scintillating centrefold – instant popularity!

Honestly, it makes you wonder why the rest of us still haven't abandoned the interpersonal horror of the table-top RPG in favour of the incredible social opportunities provided by online games.

While looking for something to finish up with, I noticed our Obermeister's article on abandoned places [How he never mentioned <http://www.shedworks.de/> is beyond me! – Ed.] and how they inspire him, which is excellent. If you're a serious games designer who has made a number of life sacrifices for the hobby, every now and again you just want a bit of peace and quiet to do some hard thinking. Somewhere to go and be by yourself, without the possible interruptions of parents

or siblings. A place where you can't cause a car crash or get picked up by misunderstanding police for your ponderings, and where transportation officials can't remove you from their vehicles for your cries of inspiration. A little nook to be entirely alone with your thoughts, without fear of intrusion.

So if you ever happen to wander by one of those abandoned places and notice our Führer there, leave him be – at that exact moment, he may be experiencing the quiet ecstasy of inspiration with thousands of thoughts flowing through him, and it'd be better to just keep walking. ☺

'...malodorous, corpulent Bob from Idaho isn't someone you would want to spend a great deal of time with...'